Mindfulness for transitioning College students

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**Abstract**

The transition to college is a critical period for students, often marked by increased stress, anxiety, and shifts in health behaviors, such as changes in sleep and alcohol consumption. Mindfulness-based programs (MBPs), which emphasize present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance, have been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress in various populations. However, the effects of MBPs on first-year college students, particularly regarding mental health, well-being, and health behaviors, remain underexplored. This study investigates the impact of a mindfulness-based intervention on mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety), life satisfaction, and health behaviors (sleep quality, alcohol use) among first-year college students. We hypothesize that participation in the mindfulness program will result in significant improvements in depression, anxiety, and life satisfaction, as well as small improvements in health behaviors such as sleep quality and alcohol-related consequences. Additionally, we expect increases in self-compassion, mindfulness, and social connectedness in the intervention group compared to a control group.

Using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, this study will assign participants to either a mindfulness-based intervention group or a wait-list control group. Measures will include established scales for depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, mindfulness, self-compassion, social connectedness, sleep quality, alcohol use, and alcohol-related consequences, assessed at baseline, post-intervention, and follow-up. By examining both immediate and longer-term effects of the mindfulness program, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of how mindfulness can support the mental health and well-being of first-year college students. The results could inform future mental health interventions and promote the integration of MBPs into college counseling services to enhance student outcomes during this pivotal transition.

**Introduction**

The transition to college is a significant life event for many students, representing a period of growth, challenge, and increased responsibility. This transition, however, is not without its difficulties. First-year students often encounter a range of academic, social, and emotional challenges, which can lead to elevated stress, anxiety, and depression (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Studies have consistently shown that mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and stress, are prevalent among college students, with over 30% of students reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety (American College Health Association, 2019). Furthermore, students often engage in unhealthy behaviors—such as poor sleep, poor nutrition, and alcohol use—that can exacerbate these mental health problems and hinder overall well-being (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Given the mental health crisis among college students, there has been growing interest in interventions that can improve emotional and psychological functioning. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have emerged as one potential strategy to help students manage the demands of college life while promoting mental and physical well-being.

Mindfulness is defined as the practice of maintaining focused attention on the present moment, with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). As a psychological and emotional regulation tool, mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, and improve overall emotional well-being (Zeidan et al., 2010). The growing body of research suggests that MBIs may be effective in addressing mental health concerns in college students, but results have been mixed, particularly when it comes to their effects on behavioral outcomes such as sleep and alcohol use. This study aims to examine the impact of a mindfulness-based program (L2B) on mental health, life satisfaction, and health behaviors, such as sleep quality and alcohol-related consequences, among first-year college students.

A number of studies have explored the benefits of mindfulness interventions for mental health outcomes in college students. For example, Mermelstein and Garske (2019) conducted a pilot study on binge drinkers and found that even brief mindfulness interventions led to reductions in alcohol consumption. Similarly, Dvorakova et al. (2020) conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with first-year college students and found improvements in both anxiety and overall psychological well-being after a mindfulness-based intervention. These findings support the notion that mindfulness interventions can help students manage mental health issues such as stress and anxiety during the transition to college. Bloch et al. (2017) also found that mindfulness-based programs not only reduced anxiety but also increased students’ sense of meaning in life, showing that mindfulness could enhance emotional well-being and provide students with tools for greater emotional resilience. These studies suggest that MBIs are effective for reducing common mental health symptoms in students and improving their overall well-being.

Other research has explored how mindfulness interventions can influence cognitive functioning, such as attention and memory. Kingery et al. (2019) examined the effects of mindfulness practices in a developmental psychology class and found that mindfulness exercises helped students reduce stress and improve concentration and focus. However, the effects on cognitive performance, particularly on measures of working memory and content retention, have been less consistent. For example, Friedman-Wheeler et al. (2021) conducted a study on mindfulness meditation in the classroom, but their results showed no significant improvements in content retention or cognitive outcomes such as working memory. These mixed results highlight the need for further investigation into the cognitive benefits of mindfulness and suggest that while mindfulness may help improve focus and attention in the short term, its impact on memory and learning is less clear.

In addition to mental health improvements, research has begun to examine the role of mindfulness in health behaviors, such as sleep and alcohol use. Sleep problems, including difficulty falling asleep and poor sleep quality, are common among college students (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009), and research has shown that mindfulness can improve sleep quality by reducing the physiological and psychological arousal that interferes with restful sleep. For example, a study by Zeidan et al. (2010) demonstrated that mindfulness-based practices can reduce stress and promote relaxation, leading to better sleep outcomes. In the context of alcohol consumption, Mermelstein and Garske (2019) found that a brief mindfulness intervention significantly reduced alcohol consumption in binge-drinking students, suggesting that mindfulness could be a valuable tool for addressing alcohol-related behaviors among college students. However, while there is some evidence that mindfulness can improve sleep and reduce alcohol consumption, the broader impact of mindfulness on students’ health behaviors remains underexplored.

Despite the promising findings from existing research, there are notable gaps and limitations in the literature. Many studies on mindfulness in college settings have been limited by small sample sizes, brief interventions, or inconsistent outcome measures. For example, while Dvorakova et al. (2020) found significant improvements in anxiety and well-being, the intervention duration was relatively short (only four weeks), raising questions about the long-term effects of mindfulness on college students’ mental health. Additionally, the types of mindfulness interventions used in these studies vary widely, from 10-minute daily sessions to multi-week programs, making it difficult to determine the optimal dosage and duration for maximum effectiveness. Furthermore, while many studies have focused on mental health outcomes, fewer have examined the broader impact of mindfulness on health behaviors like sleep quality and alcohol consumption.

The current study aims to fill these gaps by evaluating the effects of a mindfulness-based program (L2B) on both mental health and health behaviors in first-year college students. Specifically, this study will investigate whether participation in the L2B mindfulness program leads to reductions in depression and anxiety, increases in life satisfaction, and improvements in health behaviors such as sleep quality and alcohol-related consequences. The study will employ a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, with students randomly assigned to either the mindfulness intervention group or a wait-list control group. The primary outcome measures will include self-reported levels of depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, mindfulness, self-compassion, social connectedness, sleep quality, and alcohol-related behaviors.

By examining these variables, the study will contribute to the growing body of literature on mindfulness interventions in college settings and help clarify the potential benefits of mindfulness training for first-year students. The hypothesis is that the mindfulness-based program will lead to significant improvements in mental health outcomes, including reductions in depression and anxiety, and increased life satisfaction. Additionally, it is predicted that the program will lead to marginal improvements in health behaviors, particularly in areas such as sleep quality and alcohol-related consequences. Given the prevalence of mental health and health behavior issues among college students, this research could have important implications for the development of mindfulness-based programs tailored to support students' well-being.

In conclusion, the current study seeks to investigate the effects of a mindfulness-based program on mental health and health behaviors in first-year college students. With its randomized controlled design and comprehensive outcome measures, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of mindfulness for promoting well-being in college students. By addressing both mental health and health behaviors, the findings from this study could inform the development of more effective interventions aimed at improving the overall college experience and supporting students in navigating the challenges of this important life transition.

**Methods**

This study focuses on the effects of a mindfulness-based attitude and lifestyle on first-year college students. It uses mindfulness-based programs to measure changes in the levels of depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, mindfulness, self-compassion, social connectedness, compassion, sleep issues, alcohol use, and alcohol consequences. The study uses 109 participants, 55 in the intervention group, and 54 in the control group. These participants are all first-year psychology students at the same college, and they all volunteered for the study. We determined that the best way to recruit the participants for this study was to use flyers outside of popular buildings (such as the student center, library, or dining halls), and ask the professors from the introductory psychology classes to send emails to students about the opportunity.

The study will consist of multiple scales that measure levels of depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, mindfulness, compassion, and sleep quality. There is also a young adult alcohol questionnaire (B-YAACQ) that measures any negative effects or consequences of alcohol consumption. Participants from both the intervention group and the control group are asked to answer the surveys truthfully, and then the study starts. The participants in the intervention group are placed in mindfulness training courses along with a mindfulness coach to help. The control group is not receiving any treatment during the study. After the mindfulness course is done, the participants complete the same surveys again. The results of the pre and post course survey are then compared to assess the differences. The incentive for the participants to complete the study will be extra credit or course credit that equates to a three-credit class.

After the study is over, there will be a debriefing session made available for participants with any questions about the study. There will be a review of everything that was recorded in the study, the incentives, and the meaning of the surveys if there is any further confusion.

**Results**

**Disclaimer**: We were not able to collect data for this study. The results presented and discussed represent what we theoretically anticipated if we were able to obtain data.

**Discussion**

This study addresses the critical period of time that is the transition between high school and college and the effects that this time period can have on students. This study is significant because this time period is often associated with increased alcohol consumption, depression, and anxiety. The study demonstrates the positive effects that mindfulness-based interventions have on these factors, as well as increased sleep quality, life satisfaction, and a decrease in negative alcohol consequences and sleep issues.

In our results, we identified significant decreases in all negative effects within the intervention group. The control group, with no meditation or mindfulness programs, had natural, smaller decreases within their results as well. We hypothesized that the mindfulness programs would produce greatly improved levels of the variables tested, and the study supports out hypothesis. The results of this study also support past findings and studies as well. This study is especially important because it demonstrates the importance of available mindfulness-based courses and teaching first year students about mindfulness techniques. These techniques can help future students develop coping strategies and healthy alternatives to excessive drinking and other harmful behaviors.

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